Agency, Security and Governance of Small States

A Global Perspective

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At the fourteenth edition of the Bratislava Global Security Forum (GLOBSEC) in 2019, the conference welcomed more than 750 guests from 64 countries at the 5-star Grand Hotel River Park that overlooks the Danube. Besides dozens of panel discussions with 143 speakers in total (GLOBSEC, 2019a), including acting ministers, prime ministers, and presidents, the event also facilitated numerous informal encounters between international participants on the sidelines, representing think tanks, ministries, media outlets, and academic institutions. As then Slovak President Andrej Kiska proudly declared in his opening remarks of the conference, the world had come together in Bratislava, "to discuss the most pressing issues we all face" (GLOBSEC, 2019b).

This chapter explores the institutional evolution of the forum in the context of small-state status-seeking. I argue that GLOBSEC and other, similar, policy conferences in Central and Eastern Europe represent nodal points of informal networks of transnational elites. They play a decisive role in practices of socialisation and the management of status hierarchies within the Euro-Atlantic security community. As such, they allow small states in the region with limited material resources to participate in the evolution and formulation of Western policies by building and promoting "interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships" (Cooley & Nexon, 2016, p. 78). GLOBSEC represents a deliberate attempt to raise Slovakia's status *within* the Atlantic security community *after* the state had joined both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

In what follows, I first briefly look at the political socialisation of Slovakia within the Euro-Atlantic security community as a continuous status-seeking process. I argue that in this process, gaining access to (Western) strategic policy debates and moving to the centre of informal elite networks have been of crucial importance. In the second section, I suggest that policy conferences have historically played an important role in the management of status hierarchies by forging informal personal ties between national elites. In this context, GLOBSEC initially emerged as a student-led initiative with the aim to "put Bratislava and Central Europe on the map of transatlantic thinking and to move the region from the periphery to the centre of international debate" (GLOBSEC, 2015, p. 4).

In the third and final section, I discuss GLOBSEC and its function for Slovak status-seeking in more detail. Based on interviews with several GLOBSEC employees, my analysis points to three interrelated aspects that help to illuminate the meaning

and consequences of smallness. The process of status-seeking is linked to the establishment of social networks with transnational elites, whose presence confers symbolic values on the venue. In consequence, GLOBSEC has come to provide distinct functions for Slovak foreign policymaking by serving as an informal platform to promote the official policy agenda. At times, it has even allowed the Slovak state to 'punch above its weight' in international politics by contributing to global crisis diplomacy. Nevertheless, the evolution of GLOBSEC also illustrates how gaps in social status between states within the Euro-Atlantic security community endure over time.

After socialisation—status-seeking in Slovakia and beyond

With the end of the Cold War, most states in Central and Eastern Europe set out to leave their socialist past behind. The widespread talk of 'returning to' or 're-integrating with' Europe expressed the political desire to be recognised as part of the Euro-Atlantic security community. In this context, political elites in Central and Eastern Europe were willing to accept pre-existing Western norms and rules and adapt their practices and civilian–military relations to "reap the benefits of international legitimacy" (Schimmelfennig, 2000, p. 110). In the case of Slovakia, however, the challenge of state-building significantly complicated socio-economic reform and democratisation processes.[1]

In contrast to its nominal peers within the so-called Visegrád Group,[2] including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, the country in the 1990s faced creeping authoritarianism under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. In consequence, Slovakia missed the first enlargement round of NATO. Likewise, the EU did not extend its 1997 enlargement offer to Slovakia. These developments, among others, led to the mobilisation of pro-democratic Slovak NGOs, which in early 1998 set up the 'Civic Campaign' (OK'98) to ensure free and fair parliamentary elections with the support of international donors (Bútora, 2007).

The electoral defeat of Mečiar in October of the same year eventually enabled the country to catch up on domestic reforms in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities. The change in government also marked an important watershed moment for Slovak civic activism.

In April 1999, NATO offered its membership action plan to Slovakia. The European Union's Helsinki Summit in December 1999 opened accession negotiations. In spring 2004, Slovakia finally joined both organisations. The successful transition and membership in Western institutions resulted in the country's improved social position on a global scale. Slovak Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan openly acknowledged these status effects at the time by arguing that

> even today we are not perceived abroad only as Slovakia but as Slovakia—a country accessing the European Union and NATO. Slovakia by its entry into these groupings gains a share of the *enormous reputation* these two groupings enjoy in today's world.
>
> (Kukan, 2004, p. 21, my emphasis)

Indeed, the finalisation of the accession process to Western institutions in spring 2004 opened a new chapter in Slovak political history. In particular, it had effects on the state's foreign policy goals and its strategies for attaining them.

Prior to joining the European Union and NATO, most states in Central and Eastern Europe stood ready to adopt and internalise the prevalent norms of the hegemonic, Euro-Atlantic security community to which they wanted to gain access. By contrast, once they became members, they set out to receive recognition and raise their status through in-group differentiation (Bátora, 2013, p. 389). In this context, some scholars have focused on analysing the provision of development aid as a form of status-seeking by Central and Eastern European states.

Specialising in aid to particular regions has enabled these states to differentiate themselves from other Western donors (Profant, 2018, p. 380) and to speak on behalf of countries with similar (post-communist) backgrounds seeking EU and NATO membership. In doing so, they have also tried to increase their own relevance. By contributing to the creation of yet another peripheral status group outside of the Euro-Atlantic security community, they buttress their own (new) identity as part of the in-group.

Estonia, for example, has directed most of its aid to Georgia and Moldova (Crandall & Varov, 2016) while Lithuania has set out to position itself as a "centre of regional gravity" (Park & Jakstaite-Confortola, 2021, p. 1285) through continuous engagement with Ukraine and Georgia within the context of the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP). Slovakia, in turn, has provided much development assistance to the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia (Najšlová, 2011). Although these studies highlight the changing practices of 'reclaiming subjectivity' after membership in Western institutions, they tend to prioritise the interstate level and focus on outcomes rather than processes. By contrast, informal relations between national elites and their respective social networks have been largely omitted from the analysis of status-seeking behaviour.

This comes as a surprise, since after the end of the Cold War societal elites and policy-makers from Central and Eastern European states faced the challenge to "carve out a place on the mental map of European and American policy-makers" (Van Ham, 1999, p. 224, cited in Kuus, 2004, p. 194). To this end, they sought to establish and use informal transnational networks to emulate Western norms and to shape dominant Western security discourses.

Adopting a notion originally developed by Ó Tuathail and Agnew in the context of critical geopolitics (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 193), Kuus describes the individuals involved in such networks as "intellectuals of statecraft" (Kuus, 2004, pp. 192 ff.) that act "at the interface of the inside and the outside of the state" (ibid., p. 192). In her words, the members of this loose group are

> deeply involved in academic research, policymaking, and policy monitoring; they are not separate from but a part of the state apparatus. They are also highly mobile: they circulate in high government positions . . ., and thereby possess extensive experience working with international organizations and foreign governments.
>
> (ibid., p. 201)

With respect to Estonia, Kuus alludes to the existence of "close informal networks" (Kuus, 2004, p. 202) built, for example, by former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who has acted as a 'transactor' of knowledge about Estonia in transatlantic elite circles on the basis of his upbringing in the United States (p. 195). During the accession process to the Euro-Atlantic security community, these informal transnational networks buttressed attempts of Central and Eastern European states to gain specific knowledge about liberal security practices (Ejdus, 2018).[3] After they had formally joined this community as members of the European Union and NATO, however, the same transnational networks also became useful in generating agency within the hierarchy of states despite asymmetric power relations.

Managing status hierarchies: informal networks and policy conferences

Informal networks have historically played an outsized role in both the process of European integration (Heard-Laureote, 2005; Kaiser, 2007, 2009; Middlemas, 1995) and the evolution of the Euro-Atlantic security community since 1945 (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2014; Gijswijt, 2007, 2018). They have provided the foundation for the establishment of formal institutions (Grossmann, 2014) and, after their establishment, contributed to the creation of lasting "social trust in the form of normative-emotional bonds" (Kaiser, 2009, p. 21) between transnational elites.

Among the most prominent networks of this kind has been the Bilderberg Group, which emerged in 1952 on a European initiative with the aim to "prevent anti-Americanism in Western Europe, and an isolationist reaction in the United States" (Aubourg, 2003, p. 92). During the Cold War the network provided the United States "with an effective instrument to legitimize its leadership position", but it also allowed "European members . . . to better understand and influence the US policy making process" (Gijswijt, 2007, pp. 60–1).

For West Germany, in particular, the Bilderberg meetings facilitated the policy of *Westbindung* ('Allegiance to the West') and contributed to the "acceptance of the Atlantic alliance by the German Social Democrats in the late 1950s" (ibid., p. 52). At the same time, however, German elites purposefully used Bilderberg to change their status and secure political influence by "initiating and facilitating state-private networks" with the United States on a bilateral basis (Zetsche, 2021, p. 4). The resulting "web of interactions created by participation in the hegemonic system" (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990, p. 291) would ensure opportunities to raise the status of Germany within the hierarchy of the Euro-Atlantic security community after the 'rupture of civilisation' by the Nazi dictatorship.

From Munich to Bratislava

The Munich Security Conference (MSC) is a case in point. It offers an interesting historical parallel to the rise of policy conferences in Central and Eastern Europe, most of which have been directly inspired by the event in Bavaria. Established in 1963 under the name 'Wehrkundetagung' ('Meeting on Military Science'),

the original focus of the conference had been on forging interpersonal links between (West) German and US decision-makers. It aimed at integrating German elites more firmly into the Euro-Atlantic security community. More specifically, the founder, Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist, wanted "to make the country's political leaders, pundits, and opinion makers aware of the 'ideas, knowledge, and theories behind the American projects (policies) and decisions' before they became NATO policy" (Hughes & Sandwith, 2014, p. 53).

As a result, in the first decades, the conference constituted, as former conference chairman Wolfgang Ischinger puts it, "first of all a venue where German participants met their counterparts from their most important ally, the United States, but also from other NATO member states" (Ischinger, 2014, p. 32). The idea, pursued by von Kleist, was to enable "greater German participation in the evolution and formulation of policy" (Hughes & Sandwith, 2014, p. 55) on transatlantic security issues. Ischinger contends that the annual meetings have created "lasting ties across the Atlantic" and "in many cases personal friendships" (Ischinger, 2014, p. 30). Similarly, former US Senator John McCain noted that "one of the enduring values of the Munich Security Conference is the solidarity it creates and recreates each year through dynamic debate" (McCain, 2014, p. 47).

By the 1980s, the German strategic community had succeeded in becoming a "critical part of NATO's deliberations over nuclear policy" and "deterrence strategy", as NATO's 1979 double track decision on deploying and (possibly) limiting intermediate-range ballistic missiles and its aftermath exemplifies (Hughes & Sandwith, 2014, p. 61). Today, organisers and participants alike perceive the event as a "transatlantic family meeting" (Bunde, 2014, p. 3) and the "Oscars for security policy wonks" (Daalder, 2012) that has come to contribute to Western agenda-setting and even represents the West on German soil. A similar trajectory can be observed in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. As former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves has argued, "East Europeans are doing little more than replicating the transatlanticism of Western Europe in an earlier era" (Ilves, 2005, p. 193).

It is in this context that policy conferences have become a ubiquitous phenomenon in the region over the past two decades. They now constitute "must have symbols of prestige and relevance" (Ejdus, 2018, p. 117). Between 2004 and 2021, most states in Central and (South-) Eastern Europe set up (trans-)national policy conferences with a focus on integrating with(in) the Euro-Atlantic security community, some of which have been emulating GLOBSEC.[4] Most of them share similar institutional backgrounds and aims.

First, these conferences are the result of joint efforts by civil society actors and policy entrepreneurs in national ministries with financial and ideational support, from both Western European and US-based donors or (inter-)national businesses, including arms manufacturers in search of new markets. Second, they enable political elites in these states to manage and shape existing status hierarchies by gaining access to informal elite networks within the Euro-Atlantic security community. The history of GLOBSEC illustrates this process.

"Slovakia can play an influential role in international relations"

In 1999, a group of students at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (among others, Ladislav Babčan, Bruno Hromý, Tomáš Kozák, Patrik Križanský, and the first president of the Centre, Mário Nicolini) founded the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Euro-Atlantic Centre to raise "public awareness of international affairs and security issues by fostering qualified debate and research related to Slovakia's role within the Euro-Atlantic environment" (Bútora & Gyárfášová, 2008, p. 25). With the initial support of several Western embassies and in cooperation with the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations the Centre began to organise seminars, lectures, round tables, and conferences by bringing together political practitioners and scholars.

After graduating from university between 2001 and 2003, most of the founding members started to pursue careers in Slovak foreign policy and international politics. Babčan and Kozák joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while Hromý became an advisor to the government on economic issues. The President of the Centre, Nicolini, would go on to become an advisor to the Slovak state secretary at the Ministry of Defence. His direct successor as President, Róbert Vass, had different plans for his personal future, however. Shortly before the end of his final year at university, in mid-2005, Vass, together with his colleagues at the Centre—among others, Ján Cingel, Ján Gallo, and Milan Šuplata[5]—approached State Secretary Ivan Korčok (who would later become Ambassador to the United States and has been Slovak Foreign Minister from April 2020 to September 2022) with the idea of organising "an international conference that would focus on security issues from the perspective of Slovak foreign policy" (Butler, 2019; cf. Demeš, 2015, p. 10)

Initially, the Ministry was rather sceptical, particularly in relation to the scope of the project. After all, Slovakia was, as one GLOBSEC employee remarks when remembering this time, "the smallest country here in the region. . . . Why would anybody . . . come to Bratislava, if you have bigger and more influential states, with nicer capitals all around?" The seasoned Slovak diplomats were unconvinced, as they perceived the whole idea as being a "naïve, idealistic thing" (anon[ymous], p[ersonal] c[ommunication], May 28, 2022). Nevertheless, the Ministry eventually agreed to provide modest support. It offered a small budget and the conference hall in the Ministry as a venue. To the surprise of many in the Ministry, the first GLOBSEC conference, which took place across two days in October 2005 under the auspices of Slovak Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan, became a major success. Around 100 guests followed the invitation, most of them from Slovakia and the wider region, to participate in four round tables (GLOBSEC, 2005).

Vass and his team, however, also succeeded in bringing a small group of high-level state representatives and international bureaucrats to Bratislava. These included, among others, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs Martin Erdmann and the Director of Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit at the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, German diplomat Christoph Heusgen (who since February 2022 has headed the Munich Security Conference). The event also gained support from the Slovak Atlantic Commission (thereafter,

Commission), which, together with the United Nations Information Service (UNIS) in Vienna, joined the Atlantic Centre as a co-organiser (Gallo, 2005).

The Commission itself had already been set up in 1993 by young Slovak diplomats supportive of the integration of Slovakia into NATO and the European Union, because they "felt a need to supplement efficient diplomacy with [a] kind of civic pressure and [a] civic element" (SAC Slovakia, 2013). Its establishment also responded to the perceived lack of political experience among members of the Slovak political elites at the time, many of whom had been students or civil activists before 1989 (Szayna & Steinberg, 1992, p. 1). Given the excessive level of (military) secrecy in the socialist era, the level of civilian knowledge about foreign policy and, more particularly, defence policy issues was particularly limited (Joó, 1996).

As one of the founders of the Commission, Rastislav Káčer, who served as Slovakia's Foreign Minister from September 2022 to May 2023, puts it, "we were in diapers as a country and even all of us, we were, in professional life, in diapers. We were starting in diplomacy". In his words, "there was a group of enthusiasts, who felt very, very strongly that we should do everything to bring Slovakia back into the Atlantic family of nations" (SAC Slovakia, 2013). Over the 1990s, however, the Commission increasingly ceased its activities. Many of its members remained dispersed across the globe without being able to engage in the development of the organisation. Káčer, for example, had spent almost five years from 1994 to 1998 as a liaison diplomat at NATO's headquarters in Brussels[6] while colleagues with similar pro-Atlanticist views, like Igor Slobodník and Miroslav Lajčák (who has been Slovak foreign minister from 2012 to 2020) were serving as ambassadors across Europe and Asia.

Upon learning of the poor state of the Commission, Vass approached the Foreign Ministry for support. He was subsequently entrusted with arranging elections, amending the statute, and obtaining a grant for paying the membership fee to the Atlantic Treaty Association (ATA), from which the Commission had come close to being expelled (Butler, 2019). While Vass initially saw his role as 'short term', in late 2005, Martin Bútora, a leading civilian activist in the Velvet Revolution, who had just returned from his tenure as Slovak Ambassador to the United States (1999–2003), encouraged him to join the Commission himself and to become its president as a representative of the young generation.

This new personal union between the Commission and GLOBSEC created a win-win situation. On the one hand, the student-led GLOBSEC was able to benefit from the institutionalised elite networks available through the Commission in and beyond Bratislava. On the other hand, the Commission would thrive and build upon the engagement and enthusiasm of a new, younger generation interested in both international affairs and Slovakia 'having a voice' as well as 'being an active part of decision-making' (Vass, 2014).

GLOBSEC rising: from student to spokesman

Despite the strategic alliance between GLOBSEC and the Commission, the process of gaining recognition turned out to be 'an uphill battle', because GLOBSEC,

as Vass puts it, emerged after all "from a small country, a small city, which normally has not been on the radar" (Butler, 2019). Consequently, the organisers from the start focused on attracting an international audience with the goal of promoting Slovak interests, and eventually, the positions of the entire Visegrád Group in transatlantic decision-making centres located in the United States and Western Europe. After the first successful iteration of the conference in 2005, the Slovak Foreign Ministry started to cooperate more directly with the organisers by providing, among other things, symbolic capital in the form of commonly issued invitations, which was not just about sending letters but involved direct encounters and word-of-mouth recommendations.

As one GLOBSEC employee emphasises, "the foreign minister, when he went to Brussels or abroad always actively mentioned the conference, and invited the partners" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). Another GLOBSEC employee notes the value of this practice for the conference:

> [W]hen the invitation is signed by the head of GLOBSEC and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia it is a very different story compared to when it is just handed over by the strategic director of the forum and sent to the cabinet of a minister.
>
> (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022)

This way GLOBSEC profited from the symbolic power of the state.

On the other hand, GLOBSEC early on also provided the foreign ministry with considerable public diplomacy leverage, for which Slovakia as a small state would otherwise not have had the capacity or resources. In this context, the close contacts Káčer and Bútora but also Pavol Demeš (who in the early 1990s had been Minister of International Affairs and later headed the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Slovakia) continue to enjoy with the Foreign Ministry have functioned as a transmission belt to ensure bureaucratic engagement. These linkages were strengthened further when Káčer took over the presidency of the Commission from Vass in July 2008 after his return from the United States (where he had served as Slovak Ambassador since 2003).

GLOBSEC's international visibility, however, especially in the early years, was largely due to US-based contacts. Some of these contacts were the result of long-term interpersonal networks that had been established between American and Slovak civil societies since the late 1980s (cf. Bútora & Gyárfášova, 2008; Demeš, 2012). Others sprang from the circle of personal American friends of the (former) Slovak ambassadors, which "helped to kick start the whole conference and the organization" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). At the beginning, the group of Americans included, among others, Damon Wilson, Kurt Volker, and Ian Brzezinski, the son of strategist and former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, all of whom had served in various positions in the George W. Bush administration.

Over time, these and other high-ranking (former) officials would form GLOBSEC's international advisory council, at first as an informal body. Today, the group

plays an important role in the organisation's strategic planning. This interpersonal network, which grew gradually, was "absolutely key" to the success of the conference, as Vass argues (Butler, 2019). It helped to attract other, potentially high-ranking guests who would trust the opinion of former colleagues and friends. In the words of another GLOBSEC employee,

> when Damon Wilson [former Director for Central, Eastern and Northern European Affairs at the US National Security Council, among other positions] was telling someone else, "GLOBSEC is a great event I come to every year, come with me"—it helped, it helped a lot.
>
> (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022)

A decisive moment for establishing this linkage between GLOBSEC and the Euro-Atlantic policy-making community came to fruition in October 2009, when NATO's defence ministers met informally in Bratislava (NATO, 2009b). In parallel to the NATO meeting, the Commission, together with the Slovak Foreign and Defence Ministries, organised a side conference focusing on security and defence issues, titled "New Challenges—New Capabilities" (NATO, 2009a) that attracted international security experts. Both events eventually turned GLOBSEC, which took place just a month later, into a truly international event. After the meetings had been successful and proven to be of high quality, "it was much easier to get [the ministers] back to the Bratislava forum, even when there was no ministerial meeting" (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022).

Indeed, in the following three years from 2009 to 2011, GLOBSEC grew substantially as an organisation. During this time, the number of speakers and participating media outlets reporting about the event increased threefold (Demeš, 2015, p. 12). Meanwhile, the entire conference first moved from the Foreign Ministry to the National Council of the Slovak Republic and, finally, to the 5-star Kempinski Hotel River Park Bratislava (now the Grand Hotel River Park), where it has taken place every year since 2011. Simultaneously, GLOBSEC began to expand beyond the annual forum. In 2009, the organisers for the first time set up the Château Béla (Central European Strategic) Forum as an off-the-record meeting and foresight exercise to discuss pressing topics and the future programmatic work of GLOBSEC within an exclusive group of now up to 60 high-level individuals, including acting foreign and defence ministers.

Furthermore, in the wake of the global financial crisis, GLOBSEC established the Tatra Summit in 2011, which serves as a venue to discuss economic and financial issues as well as technological innovation in Central and Eastern Europe. In parallel with the multiplication of activities, GLOBSEC has also widened the thematic scope of the conference itself. In the first years of GLOBSEC, "NATO and hard security were its bread and butter, while broad European security and the EU itself were on the periphery" (anon., p.c., February 11, 2022). By contrast, since 2011 work streams have multiplied and now, besides defence and security, also include technological and economic issues and the future of Europe and

sustainability. This thematic change also speaks to the willingness on the part of the organisers to put Slovak perspectives on the transatlantic agenda rather than being on the receiving end of debates.

Punching above its weight—GLOBSEC and Slovak foreign policy

While establishing national and international contacts has provided GLOBSEC with necessary political support, the forum itself has also helped Slovakia to 'punch above its own weight' by making up for the lack of other resources. As one GLOBSEC employee puts it, "because we are small, we understand that if we do everything as Slovaks we will not be able to get there" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). In short, breaking out from peripheral status required attracting international stakeholders within other centres of power by operating as a representative of Central and Eastern Europe.

The opening of a GLOBSEC office in Brussels in January 2020 reflects this approach, as it aims to "bring Central Europe closer to the debates on the future of Europe" and to enable GLOBSEC to "be part of the core of these debates" (GLOBSEC, 2019c). For GLOBSEC it was particularly important, as one employee emphasises,

> to bring the Western Europeans and the transatlantic community into understanding the region [Central and Eastern Europe], so that it [was] not just playing a marginal role in shaping policy or just agreeing with the discussions that are already shaped by or decisions that are already taken by other actors.
>
> (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022)

As an informal meeting platform for such discussions, GLOBSEC creates distinct advantages for the Slovak Foreign Ministry in terms of promoting the official agenda. As one conference employee suggests,

> the Foreign Ministry always thinks how they could use that conference for the policy priorities of Slovakia, so they organize many meetings—bilateral, multilateral, informal meetings—on the sidelines. The Foreign Minister knows which colleague he would like to meet, what they would like to talk about and GLOBSEC is bringing them all together during one, two or three days.
>
> (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022)

GLOBSEC has thus also become an extension of Slovak foreign policymaking that, as Rastislav Káčer puts it, allows for "corridor diplomacy", whose "informal nature . . . simplifies the communication between actors" and provides a "very effective and efficient way of shaping the foreign policy" (GLOBSEC, 2012).

For example, in October 2020, the Greek and Turkish foreign ministers met for informal talks at GLOBSEC after weeks of tensions—a meeting which according to one observer took place in a "cordial, almost jovial atmosphere" (Becatoros, 2020). In the summer that preceded the Forum, warships of both states had faced each other off on high alert across the Eastern Mediterranean. At the informal meeting in Bratislava, the two sides reached an agreement to set a date for a new round of negotiations (Mitra, 2020). As one GLOBSEC employee remembers, "we did not publish this at the time, because we were asked not to do that, but they [the two ministers] actually agreed to have a regular phone call once a month. This did reduce tensions" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022).

Similarly, in June 2019, GLOBSEC served as a meeting spot for Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his counterpart from Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi. At that point, the official dialogue between both states had already been on hold for more than six months due to disputes about a possible land swap, Serbian attempts to block Kosovo from joining international organisations, and a Kosovan import tax on Serbian goods. Even though the meeting in Bratislava did not directly resolve these controversies, it would eventually contribute to the renewal of dialogue, after Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák (2012–2020) had become EU Special Representative for the Belgrade—Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues.

At the same time, the success of GLOBSEC has also left a direct imprint on regional civil society in the Western Balkans. The founders of the Belgrade Security Forum, which emerged in 2011, for example, took GLOBSEC as a distinct model. In 2016, Sonja Licht, the President of one of the three NGOs responsible for setting up the event, argued that "the Forum was inspired by GLOBSEC Bratislava Slovakia, the most important event dedicated to foreign and security policy in Central Europe" (Licht, 2016). The yearbook of Slovak foreign policy in 2011 even praised the first iteration of the Belgrade Security Forum as "one of the most successful Slovak-Serbian cooperation projects" (Lőrincz, 2012, p. 80). By highlighting the presence of Slovak State Secretary Milan Ježovica, it placed the event and the role of GLOBSEC in the context of official, bilateral relations.

Finally, GLOBSEC has also become the partner of choice for NATO in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2019, the Forum became part of the consortium of 'NATO Engages', a major public diplomacy effort of the alliance within the context of celebrating its 70th anniversary in London. As the only organisation from the region, it joined forces with the Atlantic Council, King's College London, the MSC, and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) to organise the final conference on the eve of the leaders' meeting in December. The GLOBSEC organisers themselves took this participation "as a sign . . . that they do at least recognise the forum, because they did join forces with us and not with others" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). Subsequently, NATO tasked GLOBSEC with contributing to the NATO 2030 reflection process by organising six virtual conferences on how to improve dialogue with the private sector on critical infrastructure, defence innovation, and emerging technologies (GLOBSEC, 2021).

Enduring hierarchies: "Too big for the region, too small for the world"

As the position of Central and Eastern Europe within the hierarchy of the Euro-Atlantic security community continues to evolve, however, this success story has had specific ramifications. Western acknowledgement of GLOBSEC as "the go-to spot for NATO partners in order to communicate with Central and Eastern Europe" (anon., p.c., February 11, 2022), assigns symbolic value to the organisation, but it also reifies an asymmetric relationship and the persisting gap in social status between Slovakia and other states in the Euro-Atlantic security community. Within NATO's pecking order, as Vincent Pouliot's empirical analysis suggests, Slovakia continues to occupy a peripheral position as a lower-tier power comparable to Hungary and the Czech Republic but behind Norway, Denmark, and Belgium (Pouliot, 2016, p. 219).

GLOBSEC itself faces enormous competition in Europe. Even the Brussels office mentioned earlier, which aims to "to bring a constructive voice of Central Europe to Brussels" (GLOBSEC, 2019c), speaks to this position. For GLOBSEC, the establishment of the office was built on the idea that "we were too big for the region, yet too small for the world" (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022), but with just two permanent positions, it remains quite small. In Brussels, the organisation competes with several dozen US and Western European institutions and think tanks, whose local branches operate on annual budgets of several million Euro and, in some instances, have been active for decades in EU politics (Gilroy, 2019, pp. 171–5).

Overall, the leadership position and representative function that GLOBSEC has come to play for Central and Eastern Europe coincide with distinct limits that play out on the European and global level. As one GLOBSEC employee argues with respect to this distinction,

> [I]f you are not in the EU, in its immediate neighbourhood, or in the US, you do not really know where Slovakia is on the map. So that became also an attractive point for many people to travel [to GLOBSEC]. . . . Many policy makers, foreign ministers, defence ministers, started to connect the dots for the region. . . . *It became a kind of a bridge to Europe* for 'bigger' travellers, especially for ministers and above.
>
> (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022, my emphasis)

The tension between regional pre-eminence and Western recognition on the one hand and international subordination on the other is further reinforced by the views of yet another GLOBSEC employee, who comments on the position the forum occupies within the global hierarchy (of conferences):

> I do not want to compare the GLOBSEC forum to the Munich Security Conference. *It is not possible*. Munich is the model of conferences; it is more than fifty years old. It is great, huge and everybody goes there. But when it

comes to Central and Eastern Europe, I think, GLOBSEC is *recognized* by the Western part of Europe and also the United States.

(anon., p.c., May 28, 2022 my emphasis)

In short, for GLOBSEC, major Western network events that, besides the Munich Security Conferences, include the Brussels Forum and the World Economic Forum in Davos continue to provide major models and examples to follow. As one GLOBSEC employee emphasises, "when we look for inspiration we look at Munich" (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). For example, GLOBSEC has adopted the format of night-owl sessions, that is, panel discussions and debates late at night, after experiencing them in Western Europe. Another GLOBSEC employee acknowledges that "Bratislava is not Rome, Paris, not even Berlin. We need to accept this and make the best of it. We are not pretending to be someone else" (anon., p.c., February 11, 2022).

GLOBSEC's financial and organisational model speaks to this, at times, difficult and volatile position that the organisation finds itself in. To date, almost all of GLOBSEC's activities remain project-based. The strategic partnerships GLOBSEC enjoys with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence as well as with the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation combined provide less than one-third of the total conference budget (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022). The situation is similar in the case of the two other main events, the Château Béla Forum and the Tatra Summit (GLOBSEC, 2019a), as well as the overall annual budget of the entire organisation, which, on average, amounts to about six million Euro (anon., p.c., May 28, 2022).[7]

Despite this budget, however, GLOBSEC continues to depend on short-term contracts and student volunteers to run the organisation, since public sponsorship cannot finance permanent positions. On the other hand, GLOBSEC continues to provide an attractive platform for young people from across Europe to gain experience in international politics and to network with like-minded professionals from abroad, because of the "vacuum that exists in the region [Central and Eastern Europe] with regards to such opportunities" (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022). Young people from Central and Eastern Europe are interested in coming to GLOBSEC, because they identify with the region since "you go back . . . where you come from in order to support the region in promoting its interests abroad" (anon., p.c., May 3, 2022).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that informal, transnational elite networks contribute to status-seeking behaviour by small states in Central and Eastern Europe. They play a decisive role in practices of socialisation and in the management of status hierarchies within the Euro-Atlantic security community. Taking GLOBSEC as an example, I have illustrated how policy conferences allow small states in the region with limited material resources to participate in the evolution of Western strategic debate and to contribute to international diplomacy.

Over the past decade, GLOBSEC has come to represent Central and Eastern Europe within the Euro-Atlantic security policymaking and policy-debating community. It has evolved from an idea among students at a regional Slovak university to one of the largest and most prestigious events of its kind in Europe and has become a model for others. The role GLOBSEC plays for Slovak foreign policy illustrates how smallness remains context-sensitive as it depends, among other things, on the establishment and maintenance of informal cross-border networks between national elites.

GLOBSEC's success story, however, has come with specific ramifications. While the organisation occupies the leadership position in Central and Eastern Europe, it continues to face considerable competition, particularly from institutions located in Western Europe. Future research could reveal how these networks interact in more detail and investigate the interpersonal and discursive linkages between them. Studying attendance and the topics discussed at policy conferences over time would allow further examination of transnational elite networks as they shape the distribution of power within the Euro-Atlantic security community and help to define the meaning of smallness therein.

Notes

* Note: for the citation in the title, see Vass (2014).
1 On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia split into the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic. In contrast to the latter, Slovakia lacks a sustained, historical experience of independent statehood.
2 The term 'Visegrád Group' denotes the alliance between these four states. It emerged from a summit meeting of the leaders of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland held in the Hungarian town of Visegrád on February 15, 1991.
3 NATO's Partnership for Peace Consortium (PfPC) of defence academies and civilian institutes of security studies, for example, has contributed to "bringing people together and facilitating the development of a strategic community in the area of security-related research and education" (Shalamanov, 2008, p. 62) between NATO members, candidate states, and partners.
4 These include the Yalta European Strategy Conference (2004, Ukraine); the Bled Strategic Forum (2005, Slovenia); the Riga Conference (2006, Latvia); the Kyiv Security Forum (2007, Ukraine); the Lennart Meri Conference (2007, Estonia); the Wrocław Global Forum (2010, Poland); the Belgrade Security Forum (2011, Serbia); Germia Hill (2011, Kosovo); the Sofia Security Forum (2012, Bulgaria); the Warsaw Security Forum (2014, Poland); the Atlantic–Black Sea Security Forum (2018, Romania); the Minsk Dialogue Forum (2018, Belarus); the Sofia Forum/Plovdiv Economic Forum (2018, Bulgaria); and the Prespa Forum Dialogue (2021, North Macedonia).
5 After 2005, both Gallo and Šuplata joined the Commission and continued to work for GLOBSEC in various capacities. In 2016, Šuplata joined the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since February 2022, he has been working at the Office of the Foreign Minister.
6 In February 2001, Káčer was appointed Secretary of State in the Ministry of Defence responsible for negotiating the accession process of Slovakia to NATO. He subsequently served as Slovak Ambassador to the United States (2003–2008), to Hungary (2013–2018), and to the Czech Republic (2020–2022).
7 The size is comparable to the Munich Security Conference, but it depends on and requires continuous fundraising with international donors and includes all overhead expenses. From 2014 to 2019, the overall revenues of the Munich Security Conference

increased from 2.7 million to 9.5 million euros. In the fiscal year 2020/2021, the revenues decreased to 6.7 million euros (Munich Security Conference, 2014, p. 21, 2019, 2021). In contrast to GLOBSEC, which relies dominantly on funding from international organisations and the Slovak state, the private sector provides more than two-thirds of the MSC budget.

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NB: all internet pages accessed June 2022–January 2023; anon., p.c. = (anonymous, personal communication)

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